CHEAP TRUTH 16

EDITORIAL. How stands the Empire? In this special issue, we publish the first results of our mystic quest for truth and Vimto. First, a guest writer presents a very typically British threnody on the state of culture here on Airstrip One.

FAULT-LINE SKIRMISHING by Phaedrus

We're too damn polite we British. Culturally, we are a mixed bag -- everything from the most rabid Scots and Welsh Nationalists to the Little Englanders. And yet the country is not shuddering with murmurs of revolt or even reverberating to the roars of mass demonstrations outside 10 Downing Street. And this despite 4 million unemployed. Why? Politeness has a lot to do with it, but fear and insecurity have played their dramaturgical parts -- helped along by Our Leaderene and her cohorts -- to the extent that the populace is being cut apart by cultural fragmentation.

And so it is with British science fiction. British SF writers find a certain bleak joy in their isolation, in writing in a vacuum, andwe display little sense of direct involvement in the exploration of ideas. We are certainly less gregarious and confident than our American counterparts, whose works consistently occupy prime places in, for example, INTERZONE.

British writers are not lacking in talent or perception; but unfortunately they are too well endowed with apathy, and let things bumble along pretty much as they have done. They perceive politics and commercialism as fearful and distasteful. These perceptions are perhaps laudable, coming from the older, liberal, literary traditions in British SF that retain critical perceptions that might otherwise vanish. But the times they are a-changing, and not for the better, and apathy and complacency are hampering those who would combat depredations from the politicians and the market vampires.

There is a lack of vital organisation, so serious that the British culture-at-large experiences British SF as some hideous TV porridge of Dr. Who, Blake's Seven, Space 1999 and Gerry Anderson, baked up with a whole load of cardboard sets and topped with a squirting of Essence of Clarke.

Because the printed word is being supplanted by TV, we are sliding into some seriously deep shit. Serious? Why yes. As a medium, TV is utterly different from print: there it sits, in the corner: BLINK!advertsBLINK!idiocyBLINK!dreck BLINK!drossBLINK!BLINK!BLINK!

Discontinuity is the norm in TV viewing; the acceptance of contradictory thinking, the unified advertising, the debasement of everything -- especially political discourse - to the level of quiz-panel games. This IS television. By its very nature it trivialises the information it disseminates. In presenting a polished version of the 'facts,' it conceals the grounds for criticism. This superficiality is filtering out into the British macroculture of which SF is a part.

Our more immediate problem is to prevent British SF from degenerating into a marketeer's playpen. What I offer up for argument is this:

An organisation called 'Science Fiction Writers of Great Britain.'

Yes! -- you heard me: SFWGB, dammit! We need an organisation to cater specifically to the needs of science fiction and fantasy writers, run by writers for writers in the speculative field. The needs of these writers cannot be met by the BSFA, the Cassandra Workshop, the Writers Guild of Great Britain, or the Society of Authors. Only through a gathering of skills, such as SFWGB, can we properly identify our problems through criticism, create workable solutions, and even (who knows) effectively take an initiative.

Uncompromising criticism with integrity. It is not a safe stance to adopt, for it is the fault-line that cuts right across our society. The problems of the genre are not unique to SF. Modern Britain appears to be breeding a youth that is unemployed, unimaginative, and hopeless, with minds contaminated by stereotypes and wish-fulfillment slammed in by unchallenged television advertising.

The big answers lie in the political arena. No amount of ducking and evading will make this reality vanish, because experience has shown us that we can't write our fictional way out of a cultural crisis.

So do something! We'd better start cultivating a sense of urgency, because the Great British Culture Death is approaching critical mass. If we don't organise <u>now</u> we'll be cut to pieces by the shrapnel.

CHEAP TRUTH Top Ten (with helpful quotes from locals)

TRILLION YEAR SPREE by Brian Aldiss "assisted by" David Wingrove (Gollancz £15) Authors tremble for their reps as "Britain's oldest Young Turk" prepares to unleash this massive new version of his 1973 SF litcrit classic. Described as "completely revised," "brutally frank," and "bang up to date," this hefty opus is an essential accoutrement for the serious, globally-minded critic or fan. Without doubt, SPREE will once again prove the unquestioned superiority of Britain as a source of intelligent, informed criticism and provocative, well-formulated literary analysis. Most of it will be about Americans.

THE UNCONQUERED COUNTRY by Geoff Ryman (Allen & Unwin £9.95) Slightly expanded version of the instantly classic INTERZONE novella, a shocking, brutally depressing SF tragedy that directly confronts the reader with high-voltage visionary excess. "I wept aloud!" "Really great illustrations!" "The best thing INTERZONE ever published!" "Most of the new stuff is padding."

MYTHAGO WOOD by Robert Holdstock (Gollancz £8.95) Archetypal fantasy concerning a tiny patch of ancient English forest where the mystical soul of Britain, or at least a lot of deeply portentous literary/mythic symbols, seem to reside. Involuted, damp, very insular, vaguely creepy. "Where it's at in Britain today!" "A marvel!" "Brilliantly written and perceptive!" Britons adore this book.

THE BRIDGE by Iain Banks. (Macmillan £9.95) The third novel by the wunderkind Scottish author of the amazing WASP FACTORY and cryptic WALKING ON GLASS. The subterranean fantasy influences of this vividly imaginative and cheerfully sadistic writer have come directly to the fore in THE BRIDGE, but don't tell his publishers. "The most compulsive and original writer working today!" "Obviously possessed of twisted genius!" "Wow!"

ESCAPE PLANS by Gwyneth Jones (Orion £3.50) Bizarre effort by shocktrooper of Britain's radical feminist SF contingent, a literary clique which possesses admirable discipline, long-term plans, and a well-developed and pitiless sociopolitical ideology. "Lesbian tripe that chokes the reader to death with jargon!" "Part of the revolutionary struggle to wrest possibilities from limitations!" Genuinely twisted, ESCAPE PLANS features spaceships that are not allowed to go anywhere and scrabblingly desperate social uprisings. Impressive energy level and imaginative concentration make Gwyneth Jones a writer to watch.

SONGBIRDS OF PAIN by Garry Kilworth (Gollancz £8.95) Collection by highly regarded short story writer. Exotic settings, baroque, obsessive prose. "Exceptionally good." "Best I've read in years." "I believe in science fiction as a serious literature," declares the author in his intro, a declaration that would be more convincing if it didn't have to be made at all.

BOOKS OF BLOOD v. 1-6 by Clive Barker (Sphere). This fervid and fertile six-volume collection of horror shorts has the clammy intimacy of a blowjob from the dead. "The future of horror." "Blows out the genre's amps." Heartening proof that a British writer of talent and determination can rise suddenly from obscurity to completely paralyze a transatlantic readership.

GHASTLY BEYOND BELIEF by Kim Newman and Neil Gaiman (Arrow £2.50). A much-needed dose of comic relief, this book collects a long series of horrible excesses and solecisms in written SF and sci-fi films. Convulsively funny, it must be read to be disbelieved. None of your "dry British humor" guff here -- you'll wince, you'll scream, you'll beg for a chance to breathe. "The ultimate toilet book!"

CHEAP TRUTH London
Editing: Vincent Omniaveritas
Graphics: privatised by Tory regime and sold to a Yank multinational.
NOT COPYRIGHTED. "Granted, it's not REALLY science fiction, but -- "

SFWA

The Central Committee, to meet at the end of the week, will take up ideological issues in order to seize the high ground in the realm of ideas and overcome resistance from ~~party~~ cadres and conservative opponents of the economic changes, according to diplomats here.

Pilgrimage to Node Zero
by Seth L. Lapcart

The Old Polemicist paused for a moment in the scant shade of a utility pole and wiped sweat from the plastic headband of his gimmie cap as he watched an emaciated grackle wandering around, pecking listlessly at the baked brown earth of a nearby backyard. For some reason, he felt a poignant affinity with the pathetic bird.

"Your problem," said the Younger Polemicist, unaware of his companion's glum preoccupation, "is that you are not culturally online."

"Jargon," complained the Old Polemicist, roused briefly from his torpor. "I have come two thousand miles in search of enlightenment, and all I get is empty jargon."

"It only sounds empty to you because you are so totally out of touch. Or, to rephrase it in a dated idiom that you might be better able to relate to, unhip."

They climbed quaint wooden stairs to the Younger Polemicist's aerie, from whence, it was rumored, all postmodern radical science-fiction ideology emanated. "I detested jargon just as much in the 1960s as I do now," the Old Polemicist complained, threading his way between tottering book cases into the shadowy recesses of Node Zero (as the simple wooden cabin was known in the cybernetic argot that the Younger Polemicist and his fellow-travelers found so apt). Brushing aside back issues of Science 86 and Soviet Life, the Old Polemicist slumped onto the couch.

The Younger Polemicist put on a tape of Handel played by a Japanese koto orchestra, knowing that his visitor would be unable to cope with anything more modern. "Let's face it, you don't even read Asimov's magazine. You hadn't heard of the Humanist Faction, till I told you about it. You probably even like some of their stuff." He sneered contemptuously. "Deeply meaningful mood pieces evoking insight into the human condition--that's what your 'new wave' was all about back in '68, wasn't it?"

"Well, to some extent. But--"

"Read this." The Younger Polemicist handed him a copy of the April 1986 Asimov's, open at "Down and Out in the Year 2000" by Kim Stanley Robinson.

The Old Polemicist struggled to focus his bleary eyes in the shuttered dimness. Already, in the same issue, he had attempted "R&R" by Lucius Shepard only to disgrace himself by dozing off during the early pages, baffled and bored by the implausible mix of mysticism, drugs, and futuristic warfare.

"Actually I rather like this one," he said a while later, upon finishing Robinson's grim depiction of street Blacks hustling spare change from high-tech yuppies of tomorrow. "It has verisimilitude."

"That's not the point." The Younger Polemicist seized the magazine and flipped back to page 73. "Look at this description of the holo-TV program that the panhandlers are watching."

The Old Polemicist re-read the relevant paragraphs:

> "Who the fuck is this?" said Ramon.
> Johnnie said, "That be Sam Spade, the greatest computer spy in the world. ... Watch out now, Sam about to go plug his brains in to try and find out who he is."
> "And then he gonna be told of some stolen wetware he got to find."
> "I got some wetwear myself, only I call it a shirt."

There was more, and it was suddenly obvious: the show which the characters were mocking was a direct parody of William Gibson's Neuromancer. Robinson's story was not a story at all. It was a rebuttal, debunking the glitz of techno-fetishistic escapist fiction. No wonder the Younger Polemicist saw things in terms of factions. There were two factions now--a whole literary context that the Old Polemicist hadn't even known about. "I'm not just offline," he admitted sadly, "I'm unplugged."

"Your shame is admirable, and too seldom seen." The Younger Polemicist dumped more Asimov's issues on his disciple's arthritic knees. "Better get busy." He turned back to his computer and logged onto some distant samizdatabase. Flickering green symbols danced across the CRT in response to stacatto bursts from his fingers at the keyboard.

The Old Polemicist paged through the magazines in the manner of one doing dutiful penance. Norman Spinrad's "The Neuromantics" seemed to offer help, as an overview; yet it was an overview through binoculars, surveying the subject in a wistful attempt to get closer to it. Despite ugly modern idiom ("informed his intellectuality" and so on) it had a dated air, and Spinrad underlined his own lack of authority by inadvertantly

using the word "perhaps" three separate times in two short concluding paragraphs.

"A User's Guide to the Postmoderns" by Michael Swanwick seemed more comprehensive. Swanwick's gross ignorance of history was disconcerting (he credited Delany, Disch, Lafferty, Spinrad, and Zelazny with "ushering in" the 1960s "new wave," while omitting Moorcock, who invented it, and Ellison, who imported it); but might ignorance of the past imply a viewpoint aligned with the present? Alas, no: the article divided writers into arbitrary, incestuous cliques invested with bogus drama via silly phrases such as "they engaged in a frenzy of inference swapping" or "Sides had been chosen, names dropped, and the battle could commence." Swanwick, who had once cowritten a hard-core cyberpunk story with William Gibson, sounded like a housewife narrating gossip about new neighbors who'd moved in next door. The caricatures were less than enlightening.

Where, then, could the Old Polemicist find truth?

Asimov's was the new marketplace for postmoderns, and Dozois, its editor, had invented the term "cyberpunk"; so the magazine's editorials should offer guidance, much like Moorcock's or Campbell's in bygone eras. But Dozois wasn't allowed to write the editorials. Asimov did that; and it it looked as if he hadn't read the stories in his own magazine. He seemed more in his element answering the laughably lamebrained letters from readers whose middlebrow complacency implied that they didn't read the stories either. An odd (and precarious) situation indeed.

These idle musings were interrupted by a sudden call to action. "Hey, we have to make it down to the copy center before 5:30 to Xerox the agitprop." The Younger Polemicist logged off, grabbed a battered file folder stuffed with anonymous diatribes against the status-quo, and slipped into his plastic Korean sandals.

The Old Polemicist dutifully accompanied his guru back out into the heat. "I gather David Brin doesn't actually believe there is any such thing as a new movement," he remarked hesitantly as the Younger Polemicist nursed his rust-riddled Volkswagen along Main Street, frugally seeking a parking meter with free time left on it.

"There's a trenchant quote from Comrade Shirley about that." The Younger Polemicist parked his car and plucked from his folder a transcript of the Science Fiction Research Association's 1986 conference panel on cyberpunk literature. "Listen: 'You don't want to believe there is a movement, because it frightens you--because you think you're not competent to handle the new idiom of it.'" He gave the Old Polemicist a meaning look, then entered the copy center and commenced operating a self-service Xerox machine with obsessive intensity.

"It seems to me," the Old Polemicist suggested, "that Shirley's quote implies he's not frightened by cyberpunk, so he is competent to handle the idiom of it."

"So?"

"Well, forgive my hubris, O master, but if John Shirley can handle it, shouldn't I be able to?"

The Younger Polemicist waved an admonishing finger. "Not until you get culturally online."

They drove back to Node Zero. The Younger Polemicist urged his aged disciple back up the wooden steps. "Come on, we have important work to do."

"You're sure it's important?" the Old Polemicist asked a little later, as he folded leaflets to be disseminated through the network of ideological activists spanning the globe from Haiti to Vladivostok.

"Important?" The Younger Polemicist paused in his envelope-stuffing. "This is the first new movement in science fiction in twenty years. Its best-known member has won every major award. It is the only literature with an informed, online world view. And you question its importance?"

"Well, maybe not."

"Good. When you finish folding those leaflets, we have a couple hundred stamps to lick. And after you finish reading those Asimov's magazines, there's three years' worth of Omni."

"All right." The Old Polemicist nodded dutifully.

Before getting back to work, he stole a momentary glance through the venetian blind that half-obscured the window. Down in the yard, the ragged old grackle was still there, feebly but persistently pecking, pecking at the unyielding soil, under the merciless sun.